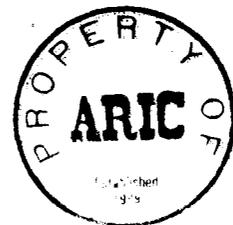


# **AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN PAKISTAN**

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# **AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN PAKISTAN**

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An Afghan expert wrote in 1960: "It is not an exaggeration to say that the essential problem of Afghanistan is that of women. And it is from that problem that all others are derived because the situation of women influences all aspects of Afghan life....."<sup>1</sup>

Pakistan can still pride itself for playing host to Afghan refugees, who have been here for almost two decades now. As Afghanistan awaits peace, refugees remain uncertain about their future. Refugee life is painful and complex given the social, cultural and political set up and constraints of the host country. Men and women refugees go through the same trauma once they are forced to leave their homes and take refuge in an alien environment. However, some experiences are peculiar to women, as they are the weaker sex. Women constitute the majority of refugees throughout the world but the numbers have not made any significant impact on policy makers to adopt women friendly refugee policies, though specific projects targeting women have been adopted by various agencies. Generally they are more vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination than their male counterparts. As the majority do not voice their grievances and problems therefore, they are assumed to be having no major problems, which is a wrong perception. Culture and refugee conditions both have contributed to women silence. The voiceless must be taken into account while approaching refugee issues as they constitute a sizeable portion of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Afghan women refugees and girls make up more than half of the present refugee population (including registered and unregistered refugees) in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> According to a news report which appeared in *The News*, Islamabad (20 March, 1999) the number of Afghan refugees in the province of N.W.F.P, Baluchistan, Punjab and Islamabad are 1,119,168; 331,908; 132,058 and 56,219 respectively. These figures cannot be totally relied upon, as number of refugees have got fake Pakistani identity cards and the counting of unregistered refugees is guess work.

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<sup>1</sup> Deidre Wulf, Afghan Refugees in Pakistan, in *Refugee Women and Reproductive Health Care: Reassessing Priorities*, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children New York, June 1994

<sup>2</sup> *Liberal Times*, Vol.5, No.1, 1997.

Afghan women refugees can broadly be categorized as- rural and urban.; old and new. The life styles of women in both the cases vary therefore, both these frameworks will be used throughout this paper which is an attempt to study the prevailing problems and future prospects of Afghan women refugees. This categorization may not be accurate and may overlook other divisions such as ethnic, living in camps or outside refugee villages etc, but the broad framework makes analysis of refugee life easy.

There is distinction between old and new refugees, the former have become familiar with the Pakistani environment given their long stay. They speak of being Pakistanized, as they have adopted much in the cultural and social sense. The old educated urbanites can converse in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, while their children are more fluent speakers. They are acquainted with the political and social setup of Pakistan. On the contrary, new refugees are still facing problems of adjustment in the new environment. Moreover, these new refugees, mostly urban and educated have not been treated by the government in the same manner as the old (mostly rural) as the former have refused to reside in the camps. Afghan Commissionerate holds itself responsible only for those who live in the camps. Some urban refugees, belonging to the lower middle class strata, are living in the camps at Aza Khel and Akora Khattak, N.W.F.P, but they are not receiving the same amount of material assistance as was the case in the past, because donors have drastically reduced aid and assistance for Afghan refugees. Urban refugees living outside the camps are not considered as refugees, and the government does hold itself responsible for addressing their woes.

The common perception is that they are vulnerable and marginalised and discriminated. One needs to dig deeper to have an objective and clear view of the situation. Are they satisfied with their present roles? Do they aspire repatriation to Taliban governed Afghanistan? What does the future hold for them?

During Afghanistan's ongoing turmoil, millions of people have been exiled and internally displaced. Most women along with their entire families opted for crossing the border after being denied security, economic, and educational opportunities in Afghanistan. The forced migration to Pakistan has left deep psychological scars on women. They easily found shelter and some basic necessities of life but adjustments for refugees do not come easy as it might seem on the surface. Though life goes on for them but they feel

deprived, denied and alienated from everything that is familiar. Given the Pakistani politico-cultural constraints they had to make compromises. The locals in N.W.F.P, Baluchistan and Punjab had equally to make adjustments in living with refugees, as the presence of the latter has had a social, psychological and economic impact upon their lives too.

### **The rural /urban divide and culture**

Most western scholars and even some members of Pakistani intelligentsia overlook the traditional/cultural perspective in approaching the Afghan refugees. Tradition has played and still plays an important role in the lives of Afghan women, because they are strongly embedded in the social fabric of the country. The modernist/liberal spectacles show a hazy and one-sided picture because majority of the women have a rural background where traditions are valued and upheld. Traditions have not been discarded in refugee life, and have played a positive role in the basic protection of women. According to *Pukhtunwali* (the code of Pukhtuns) women are the honour and respect of men, which automatically ensures their protection. Honour, dignity and respect are greatly valued by them. Had Afghan women wished otherwise Pukhtunwali would long have been dead, its prevalence itself speak of its general acceptance and cannot be criticized by those who cannot comprehend the concept. It is conservative in nature but it has assured women respect and security. By the same yardstick the rural women cannot be critical of the urbanized women as urbanization cannot be easily understood by those who have not experienced it. Urban women are of the opinion that full participation in society is possible with no loss of honour to self or family, nation or religion. The difference of opinion will remain and should not be objected to, but problems arise when no differentiated approach is undertaken by analysts in dealing with Afghan refugees, as the expectations and needs of the latter vary given their backgrounds.

Protection is the primary objective and need. Refugee women seek protection from everything that has forced them to flee, such as fear of persecution, the protection of life and survival becomes essential. Coming to Pakistan has meant living under peaceful conditions with safety and security for the women and their families. In the Pukhtun culture women do not move alone, they are always chaperoned by their husband, father or brother. Similarly, Afghan women moved in families which itself was a consolation

and gave them the basic psychological comfort of being cared for by their males. This has also protected them from being raped and harassed. This is not to suggest that there have been no incidents of the kind, but the number of victims in case of Afghans have been relatively low in comparison with other refugee movements in the world, where 70 percent women have been raped during flight and refuge. Pukhtunwali<sup>3</sup> and Islam both have contributed toward it because majority of the women in the initial waves were ethnic Pushtuns/Pathans and Muslims. These women had a rural background. They originated from small villages where everyone was part of the same extended family.

Once in Pakistan they were congregated in refugee villages in N.W.F.P and Baluchistan, where everyone was not part of the family. *Purdah* (seclusion and veiling of women)<sup>4</sup> is observed in case of strangers therefore, rural Afghan women no longer living amongst their relatives had to observe it. *Purdah* is deeply ingrained in Afghan life, and to observe *purdah* has a positive connotation for Afghan women in the camps. Afghan women practicing *purdah* are unanimously in favour of it. They feel protected by it and find that it ensures them privacy and the right to withdraw from unpleasantness. None of the women find that *purdah* restricted their work and, and contrary to what an outside observer might think, the women do not believe that *purdah* locks them up in their own separate universe, it merely keeps out men.<sup>5</sup> The attitude and culture of the local rural Pukhtun women was similar which made it easier for them to accept the Afghan women amongst them.

The adherence to *purdah* among the refugees vary in degree depending on their backgrounds. Educated, predominantly urban middle class Afghan women do not strictly adhere to *purdah* though they might pursue a conservative lifestyle. Refugee life deprived the rural women from their customary work and freer social interactions in the familiar surroundings of village life. Given their traditional low level expectations they adjusted themselves in the new environment. Urban women have had more problems as they expect more from life. They want education, employment and a fair standard of living in

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<sup>3</sup> *Pukhtunwali*, the social code of Pathans mainly referring to honourable behavior. It is subdivided into three components:-hospitality or honourable use and management of goods; leadership, honourable management of public affairs and female seclusion.

<sup>4</sup> *Purdah* (seclusion of women) is a key element in protection of the family's pride and honor .

<sup>5</sup> H.Christensen, *The Reconstruction of Afghanistan: A Chance for Rural Afghan Women*, United Nations Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) UNRISD Report, Geneva, 1990

Pakistan. They have not opted for camp life but settlement in the cities has been problematic.

While Pakistan did not close doors to Afghan refugees but it certainly was not prepared for such large numbers.<sup>6</sup> There was no refugee administration or infrastructure and the way it evolved reflected the un-preparedness for such large exodus. Moreover, not being a signatory to 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol, Pakistan could not adopt a clear cut legal policy, but it had to accommodate Afghans in the absence of legal structures. The initial confusion and problems gradually gave way to evolution of a policy that has been lenient, as Afghans enjoyed freedom of movement, of settlement and were allowed to establish and run businesses. They also had access to services such as free education and health care. However, things have changed over the years, Pakistan's refugee policy has matured and is still quoted as exemplary by international standards. The policy is not perfect and it has its critics but nevertheless Afghans have been sheltered and not refouled. Massive repatriation occurred in 1992, after President Najeebullah stepped down and Mujahideen took over, but complete repatriation an elusive objective at present is yet awaited as peace has not been restored in the war-torn Afghanistan.

### **Existing Problems**

Currently, the Afghan women are going through economic and social travails. Education, self-reliance and income-generation are some of the major problems faced both by rural and urban refugees whether they are old or new. Urban women not only feel the increasing economic constraints, as life in the city is expensive, but the psychological aspect of being deprived of various rights, such as employment, free education etc. "My sisters and brothers are doctors, but in Pakistan they cannot practice, and are jobless," said Sohaila, an urban refugee. She pointed out that as most of the new refugees did not have jobs therefore, the rents and school fees were too much an economic burden for them to bear. Secondly, the new urban refugees are not fluent in *Pushto* and have linguistic problems, which itself put a psychological pressure on them. It has resulted in

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<sup>6</sup> Between September 1979-December 1979, following Hafizullah Amin's overthrow of Nur Mohammad Taraki, the number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan were 193,000. The number had reached over 1 million by 1980 and over 2.8 million by 1983. In 1990 the number had peaked to 3.27million. For more details see

increasing frustration among Afghan women. Women opine that they are generally treated well and not discriminated by their own men and the Pakistani hosts. Perception has however, slightly changed about women refugees after the arrival of new refugees (mostly urban and educated) in 1994. These women have not only been the target of criticism by Pakistanis but also the rural Afghans. Being educated, liberal and opting for settling in posh areas of N.W.F.P and Islamabad, these women have been held responsible for the rise in prostitution. No surveys have been carried out in this regard but the Afghans themselves accept that prostitution is practiced by some women which is socially unacceptable to both Afghans and Pakistanis. Some Afghans point out that they feel discriminated because they are given better treatment than their men by the Pakistanis. They speak of their men being molested and harrassed by the local police, which eventually affects women as their lives are intertwined.

Afghan women do voice in subdued tones their grievances against Pakistan and the regime in Kabul. They hesitatingly express their displeasure over certain policies of the host government. The closure of Afghan universities mainly medical<sup>7</sup> and clinics in N.W.F.P has strongly been disapproved by them, as doors of education to thousands of young Afghans have been closed. Around 3,500 students studied in them. Even some Pakistanis had sought admission in the Afghan universities, but their degrees were not recognized by Pakistan nor by the Taliban. The closure of Ummahatul-Momin, a women unviersity operating in Hayatabad, Peshawar, affected the future of Afghan women aspiring education and intending to play a positive role in the rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Women opined that as no solid reason had been given by the Pakistan government for the closure, therefore, they suspect it as an indirect signal to leave Pakistan. The government had to reassess its decision as it had brought a lot criticism<sup>of</sup>.

Ummahat tul Momineen was reopened in March 1999, after remaining closed for almost six months. At the time of writing this paper plans were in progress regarding the setting

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Nancy Hatch Dupree's article 'The Demography of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan' in *Soviet American Relations with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan* edited by Hafiz Malik. Macmillan Press, London 1987

<sup>7</sup> Ummahatul Momineen, Syed Jamaluddin Afghani, Ahmed Shah Abadali, Hewad and Islami Pohantoon were the five Afghan universities in N.W.F.P closed down by Pakistan government in August 1998 on grounds that these operated without proper authorization. The administration of these universities however, suspected that were punished for staging anti-US demonstrations in the aftermath of US cruise missile attacks on Khost, Afghanistan

up of an Afghan university in Peshawar by the end of April, 1999. Initially a medical and dental college will be set up to adjust the affected students of the five universities. The proposed college will cater for the needs of Afghan refugees. At least 3,000 Afghan students would initially be admitted in the college. Run by the staff and faculty members of the five Afghan universities closed by the provincial government last year, it would be the first ever regular Afghan institution in the education sector duly recognized by the government of Pakistan. It will be registered by the Afghan Refugees Commissionerate, Peshawar as well as by the NWFP health department.<sup>8</sup> The university would have two separate campuses for men and women. The separate campus for female students will also remove Taliban's reservations about women education in Peshawar. The curriculum at the university would be Afghan and teaching practices and language of instruction would be in conformity with Afghanistan's educational standards.<sup>9</sup>

The women have also objected to the closure of the clinics. Order to their closure had been issued back in September 1998 but they still operated. The N.W.F.P government once again issued orders and closed down all clinics and drug stores run by Afghan refugees without proper authorization of the health department<sup>10</sup>. This would render a number of Afghan health professionals jobless, which in turn would affect the lives of women. This action of the N.W.F.P government no doubt has affected the Afghan doctors working in these clinics, but majority of them were quacks, whose practice meant playing with the lives of other Afghans. If the government feels so concerned about the lives of these refugees, then why did the government take so long to decide their closure? The simple answer of clinics being unauthorized do not satisfy the Afghans. A more comprehensive explanation by the government in this respect is required.

As opportunities have been restricted, frustration has spiraled amongst Afghan women. Their dignity and honour has already been dented by the increasing number of Afghan women beggars and prostitutes. They confess that it was unimaginable for them to have begged in Afghanistan, but poor economic conditions has pushed them to do the unpleasant job. As presently no financial assistance is provided to refugees in the camps,

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<sup>8</sup> *The News International*, Islamabad, March 28, 1999

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, April 6, 1999

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, March 19, 1999

some of the women have started to beg as it is a matter of survival for them. They have no jobs, no skills and have no other source of income. Relatives help them out as far as accommodation is concerned but they need food and other basic facilities of life which cannot be ensured by their poor relatives. In some cases they are old widows and beg to educate their children in the camp schools, where education is no longer free as was the case in the past. They also acknowledge that for some women it has become an easy way to earn, and is a habit. Prostitution too is on the rise amongst urban Afghan women. Though considered a social evil and strongly disapproved yet they hold economics responsible as these women want to lead a sound life.

Financial cuts have given birth to a subtle resentment between old and new urban refugees. The old no longer receive any material help as they used to in the past, the new are given some nominal assistance which is being resented by the former. They express their reservation about the new women refugees as they feel that the latter are given preference by donor agencies, and they see in it a deliberate attempt to bypass the experienced and the knowledgeable. There is an element of truth in it as currently the vulnerable and needy women are the target groups of the donors, but what they are receiving is nominal by the past standard. The financial crunch is being felt by the women as their men cannot find jobs and support families. Afghan NGOs headed by women have disapproved these cutbacks as it has meant slashing down meagre services they were offering to their Afghan sisters-ranging from computer courses to embroidery and sewing classes.

Majority feel concerned about the cost of education, as fees have increased not only in Pakistani but also the camp schools, where earlier no expenses were incurred. They have a genuine concern about the future of their children. Opportunities for higher education are limited. The government emphasizes that primary education is the responsibility of the host state as is the general practice according to the 1951 UN Convention, therefore, higher education does not fall in its domain.

### **Are they vulnerable and marginalised?**

The common perception is that Afghan women are vulnerable and marginalised Here once again I would stress the need to use the cultural lens. If we look at them by Western standards then the answer will be affirmative as vulnerability is associated with a number

of things- social and politico-economic factors etc. Afghan culture has made them invisible as traditionally they have to keep a low profile. Their basic needs and safety have to be ensured by their men which in turn gives them a strong sense of security. Sometimes they share the family burden along with their males but that is not mandatory. Here I want to mention that Afghan women have accepted the ground realities( a practical approach to life) and are determined to make the best out of what they have. Most women do not feel vulnerable and oppressed as is commonly assumed. Despite problems they generally feel safe and protected in Pakistan. Had they felt insecure and been in danger, they would not have been seen moving freely in the country. The urban women are quite visible as they go out for recreation to the public parks, dine out in the restaurants usually in groups or with family, shop in bazaars etc. Had there been excessive curbs on their movement they would not have been visible at all.

The international as well as local media has highlighted some incidents regarding the mal-treatment of Afghan women such as acid throwing<sup>11</sup> on them, or warnings to women who work with foreign agencies to quit or be ready with dire consequences. There have been reports regarding the demanding attitude of Pakistani officials. Women are used as incentives to get refugee cards, residential and work permits quickly.<sup>12</sup> Such behaviour on the part of officials is unpardonable and the accused must be punished after found guilty. Though the number of such incidents may be small but should not be shoved aside and considered insignificant as it mars the Pakistan refugee policy.

There is discrimination as far as female education is concerned. It exists because of the Afghan culture and not to any specific policy of the host. The traditional conservative Afghan society has not been very open to female education. Afghan village schools for girls were never numerous and effective. This was because rural Afghans viewed formal education with profound indifference because it was not relevant to their environment. Girls were expected to fulfil their primary roles as wives and mothers, for which they were groomed at home and not in schools. This attitude affected female education in the

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<sup>11</sup> A few incidents have occurred in this regard mainly targeting corrupt women-locals and Afghan alike, it was not Afghan specific. These incidents cannot be approved by anyone as it is unethical, even if the motive was to curb social evil in the society.

<sup>12</sup> Ashfaq Sadiq, 'Travails of Urban Afghan Refugees', *The NewsInternational*, Islamabad Nov.14,1998

camps too. Gradually, attitudinal changes have occurred and a number of females have benefited from education. They increasingly realise the value of education. This change is being noticed even in the tribal areas. Refugees living in these areas are mainly farmers from different provinces in Afghanistan along the border line of Pakistan. These people for years opposed any kind of female schooling, training and literacy, because they considered education as a Western or Russian indoctrination. Now these very people having realized the benefits of education and want their females to be educated.

The ratio of females is still small compared to male students. According to a report only 4,000 Afghan refugee girls are receiving education, compared with more than 35,000 boys.<sup>13</sup> “If you are not trying to educate the refugees-especially the girl refugees-you are in danger of losing a whole generation,” said Ruper Colville, a spokesman for UNHCR in Islamabad. In 1995, UNHCR, in collaboration with the World Food Programme, introduced a scheme that provided edible oil to refugee girls attending schools. The number of girls attending schools has doubled each year since then.

Refugee women have also been given the chance to take part in non-formal education groups. The groups allow women to share their concerns regarding their own and their families’ health and nutrition. They learn basic literacy which does help them in living a better life than before. Moreover, these non-formal groups give them a culturally suitable forum to exchange and share views with other female refugees and female staff from relief agencies.<sup>14</sup> The government of Pakistan along with foreign donors however, have to make an extra effort toward female education in the cultural context.

UNHCR focuses on the integration of refugee development process and encourages members of the staff to become more conscious of the special needs and resources of refugee women. There are vulnerable groups among women which are being targeted by the Afghan Commissionerate, UNHCR and different NGOs working for refugees. These include widows, handicapped or living a life of separation from their husbands (usually in the case of second marriage). They are vulnerable groups and require special attention. The fact that they are targeted show a sign of effort not to marginalise women

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<sup>13</sup> *Khaleej Times*, UAE, 2, September, 1997

<sup>14</sup> *Liberal Times*, op.cit. p13

and take care of the ones in desperate conditions. These vulnerables have either received or are receiving apprenticeship and are involved in income generation programmes.

In 1982 a widow camp was set up by the Pakistani authorities to provide special protection. The widows had complained that a considerable portion of their rations were siphoned off by their male relatives, and they found it difficult to feed their children. They also complained of being exploited by the camps' headmen. In response to such complaints the government of Pakistan established a special camp for them near the VIP helicopter pad in Peshawar. This policy of the government back-fired as a large number of widows expressed genuine fear and apprehension over being segregated and left alone without near-by family support. Others criticized it on the basis of using the widows to elicit charitable donations.<sup>15</sup> As the policy had disregarded Afghan traditions<sup>16</sup> (widows are not kept in isolation) it finally met its failure.<sup>17</sup> The government since then has been especially cautious in treating the vulnerable groups.

A number of Afghan NGOs have sprouted to address the special needs of women. The Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC) a non-political humanitarian indigenous women's organization, is one such NGO which began to function to assist Afghan women in Pakistan in October 1989. Through its various activities, it has sought to promote the interests of women refugee community. It has served as an educational and vocational training center and aims at empowering Afghan women with the skills and knowledge they need to support themselves and their families and play a positive role in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. It aims to educate and train women to make them more aware of their role in society, and to provide them with skills and opportunities, which enable them to be economically self-reliant. Some of its main activities are, literacy and Quranic reading classes for women, sewing and knitting training for non-literate, semi-literate and literate women in a culturally acceptable environment, i.e women teach and organise these activities. It has a library for women and a day-care center for children of

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<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Hoard –Merriam, 'Afghan Refugee Women and their Struggle of Survival' in *Afghan Resistance: The Politics of Survival*, edited by Grant M. Farr and John G. Merriam, Lahore, Pakistan 1988

<sup>16</sup> The dictates of Islam and Afghan cultural practices in general provide for the protection and general well-being of widows and orphans. Nuclear and extended families have always been the most important socio-economic institution in Afghan society. No central government has ever had the capability to provide services guaranteed by recognized family obligations, such as welfare and the care and protection of the very young, the very old, the handicapped and widows. For further details see Nancy Hatch Dupree *Of Special Concern: Women Among the Afghan Refugees*, 1984

working mothers. It has succeeded in teaching over 3,000 Afghan girls and women to read and write.

During 1998, special attention was paid to increase gender parity in the camps through training, motivation and initiation of different female activities. The number of adolescent girls was the same in vocational basic literacy programmes as that of the boys. Also, the number of female beneficiaries in income generation programmes was more than male beneficiaries in order to provide them with a more sustainable income for livelihood and to improve the status of vulnerable females.

Old people are the most respected lot in the Afghan society but they often lead a secluded life especially the old females in the refugee camps. In the beginning of 1998, a group of old women was initiated in the name of Zara Yadoona (old memories) . The purpose was to make them feel worthy and provide them an opportunity to discuss and share their ideas and experiences with the young generation. Women in the groups tell stories about their life in Afghanistan, migration to Pakistan, early life in refugee camps and difference in life in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>18</sup>

As these programmes have met successes there is need that they may further be expanded so that they reach majority of the women refugees.

#### **Are they satisfied with their existing roles?**

Roles do not remain the same in refugeehood as the latter is a traumatic experience and is by no means a normal life. Comparisons with their earlier lives in Afghanistan would show us the change they have undergone as refugees. Rural Afghan women's main responsibility was to look after the house, mother children and help their husbands in agriculture. Men ploughed the fields, sowed the seeds and harvested grains and vegetables; women baked the bread and sun-dried or pickled the vegetables. Cotton, fruits and nuts were jointly harvested. They milked goats and cows. They made handicrafts which were a source of income. Urban women were not only looking after their households but helped in generating family income by seeking employment in government institutions, education sector or engaging in private business with the tacit consent of family.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It was finally closed down in 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Annual Report 1998, Community Services Unit, Peshawar. UNHCR

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Hatch Dupree, 'Afghan Refugee Women in Pakistan: The Psychological Dimension'

Rural women mostly are living in refugee villages, no longer having the same environment to which they were accustomed in Afghanistan. While they still look after their so-called houses, cook, clean and bring up children but they no longer carry out the agricultural activities as refugees cannot have property in Pakistan. The Pakistan Interior Ministry had issued orders in March 1980, that no Afghan refugee who has or may come to Pakistan on or after July 17, 1973 should acquire land or any interest in land or landed property in Pakistan, except with prior permission in writing from the federal government in the States and Frontier Region Division.<sup>20</sup> Some refugees despite the state policy have managed to buy and cultivate property illegally having the audacity to make Pakistani identity cards. As government is no longer doling out rations or material assistance women having different skills- embroidery, shoe-making, carpet weaving etc utilize them to raise the family income. The Afghan embroidery not only has its customers in N.W.F.P and Baluchistan but it is becoming quite popular amongst foreigners as well.

Urban uneducated women living in the cities continue their family roles as they are dependent on their males. However, the educated ones try to get involved in a service occupation or working among the Afghan refugees, contributing their skills as teacher, physician or nurse but the opportunities are limited due to large scale unemployment in the provinces where most of these refugees reside. These women are vocal and have limited outlets for ventilating their frustrations because in Afghanistan they had jobs and were actively contributing to the development of country in various sectors. They are unhappy about their present status and roles. Some of these women when interviewed were critical of the lack of facilities and jobs in Pakistan as that had brought about a change in their roles, they felt that the circumstances had reduced them to be just plain housewives, though having much more to contribute. It was interesting to note that some of these women compared themselves with Pakistani women and the opportunities available to them and asking for equivalent freedom to compete with the former in jobs and education. They also point out that the old refugees are more satisfied with their present role in comparison with the new as the former are now familiar with Pakistan.

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*HUFA*, Vol.3. No.1 Peshawar, 1988

<sup>20</sup> *The News International*, March 20, 1999

One thing is clear that most of these educated urban women have an urge to contribute, and do so whenever they get an opportunity.

There are politically active Afghan women. Some of them have established their NGOs which get funding and political support from different foreign sources. Their main objective is to raise awareness among the Afghan women regarding the prevailing political situation in Afghanistan and to carry out struggle to stabilise the situation. Politics however, has not been considered a woman area, as political role is associated with men. These women have their political convictions and try to further the cause of the parties or organisation with which they are associated. Most of them are educated with sound financial backgrounds. Khursheed Afrasyabi, a Tajik and having spent around 16 years in Pakistan heads the Muslim Women Society and Fatima ul Zuhra Education Centre, Peshawar. She is of the opinion that Islamic education is important for Afghans as they need to be familiar with their own Islamic traditions and values rather than the Marxist education which has disrupted the lives of many. She strongly believes that the ongoing problem in Afghanistan is due to the Western imperialistic forces and that a foreign hand is involved, which is averse to peace in the country. She in her own limited style continues the struggle against these anti-peace forces by imparting education and training to women. Her organisation is no longer getting financial assistance as it used to, mainly from Saudi Arabia, resulting in limiting the services it earlier offered. The chairperson of Afghan Women Council, Peshawar, Fatana Ishaq Gilani is opposed to the policies of Taliban and has stressed unity amongst the Afghans to bring peace in the country. She along with her husband Ishaq Gilani, head of the Council for Understanding and Cooperation in Afghanistan, has received death threats for their political activities<sup>21</sup> She is dedicated to the cause of socially uplifting the Afghan women. She has openly and on several occasions condemned the Taliban policy of closing schools and curbing women employment in Afghanistan. The Revolutionary Association for Afghan Women (RAWA) is another organisation with political orientation. Refugee life has entrusted upon women heading and working in these institutions activist roles. They too are not

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<sup>21</sup> *State of Human Rights in 1998*, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Lahore, Pakistan February 1999 p.293

satisfied with their existing roles because they have not been able to resolve the socio-economic problems of women.

Afghan women have experienced changes in their customary roles because of the circumstances. They are generally not satisfied with their existing roles because of the economic and political constraints in Pakistan, as it is in no position to provide all the facilities desired by the refugees. There is a third aspect to it, the psychological syndrome, their pessimism is understandable, given the refugee psyche.

### **Do they want to return to Taliban governed Afghanistan?**

“Life is important-we came to save our lives; we want to go back-but with honour and security.” *Refugee woman*

Afghanistan still awaits peace, the problems between the Taliban and the opposition (the northern alliance) have not been resolved despite attempts by neighbouring countries and the UN. While mediation efforts continue, refugees remain uncertain about returning to Afghanistan. Peace is considered as the primary condition for return while repatriation the most desired objective. The ruling Taliban have brought about relative peace in the once lawless country, peace and security under them is undoubtedly unprecedented and exemplary. Except a few provinces with active frontlines, like Parwan, Takhar, Kunduz, Baghlan and Kapisa province, most other places are peaceful. Majority of the Afghan refugees still living in Pakistan belong to provinces which have been peaceful for some years now.<sup>22</sup> “Peace in Afghanistan is like peace in a prison” said Mohammad Mujeeb, an Afghan studying in the Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar. People feel secure but not free in Afghanistan, due to the Taliban policies. Secondly, due to continued fighting in Afghanistan, the widespread destruction and the unpredictability of future conditions on return, few Afghan refugees seem to be willingly opting for return. The Afghan economy can no longer feed and sustain its people. Most agree that until adequate food and shelter can be assured, few Afghans will voluntarily leave their currently difficult, though predictable circumstances.

Here too we see some variations amongst the rural and urban women. Rural Pushtun women, in contrast to their urban sisters, feel comfortable with the Taliban regime and are repatriating to the stable areas in the southern and eastern Pashtun belt of

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<sup>22</sup> Rahimullah Yusufzai, ‘Confining Afghan Refugees to Camps’, *The News International*, March 23, 1999

Afghanistan, because they are conservative and follow the traditions. However, there are some rural women who do not want to return due to the problems awaiting them upon return. An old refugee having a rural background said, “ no, I do not want to return because of the cruelty of Taliban and their indifference to the public problems.” An urban woman relates her reluctance to return to the existing problems in Afghanistan, such as no opportunities for jobs and education. Women point out that Islam has given them basic rights but the Taliban are denying them some of these rights. Some of the new urban refugees have pointed that they are willing to return provided the Taliban change their policies regarding women particularly in the field of education and employment.

“There is no bread for Afghan children, there is no job for Afghan youths, there is no medicine for the helpless Afghan women. There is terrorism and injustices in Afghanistan. The people in general and women in particular are leading extremely deplorable and miserable life,” said Fatan Gilani, chairperson of Afghan Women Council. She also stressed upon Taliban to provide jobs, education, health facilities and solve other genuine problems of their citizens instead of forcing the men to grow beard and women to observe *pardah*.

These are important indicators, it shows that the women are not opting for return despite relative peace in the country. For rural women its not education or employment, rather it's the rebuilding of the countryside and reviving the irrigation system as for them cultivation is the main source of survival. However, given their long stay in Pakistan and having experienced some basic health and educational facilities, they too now expect similar facilities for their children. The value of education has increased over the years. Families are ready to go without some comforts of life in order to get their children educated. I have met some women beggars who are begging just to pay the fees of their children. Despite the problems in Pakistan they do not want to return but lately some of the government policies have disturbed them and Afghans feel that Pakistan no longer wants them. They refer to some of the latest measures and government policies. This year (March 1999) the Afghans were ordered by the N.W.F.P government to celebrate their Eid with Pakistan rather than with Saudi Arabia as has been the tradition among the Afghans. “We got the orders from chief minister to nab refugees who celebrate Eid on 27<sup>th</sup> March,” said a police constable, at Nasirbagh camp. The Afghans criticised the

provincial government for this measure. "We are Afghans, how dare they stop us from celebrating Eid according to our tradition?" said a young Afghan woman.<sup>23</sup> N.W.F.P governments' plans to restrict refugees to camps<sup>24</sup> has drawn sharp criticism from the Afghans. Most of them question the wisdom behind the decision to confine refugees to the camps, where they won't get shelter and sources of livelihood easily. "Pakistan should allow us to go back in grace and not be forced," said Khursheed Afrasyabi. The current signals from the host are not approved and the Afghans consider them as indirect pressures forcing them to go back. All the goodwill earned by it will be lost if the government puts too much pressure on Afghans.

### **Future of Afghan women**

Afghan women refugees find it extremely difficult to answer questions related to their future. They become emotional and cynical about it. They cannot be blamed for this cynicism because Afghan conflict has prolonged so much that it seems to have exhausted the patience of those trying to find a peaceful solution to it. Plans about future are chalked out when stability can be predicted. The Afghan refugees are simply at a loss to predict their future. They have two futures: the desired one of discarding the refugee mantle and assuming a normal peaceful life upon return. Secondly, a defaulted future of continued refugehood in Pakistan. Both are fraught with problems, the former seems dark given the nature of prevailing situation in Afghanistan. Unless the civil war comes to an end and the refugees voluntarily decide to return, the Afghan women will remain in Pakistan. A woman cannot unilaterally decide to return, the male head of the family usually decides the issue of repatriation. Presently, even the men are not evaluating the option of repatriation because of the economic and security factors.

Many women talked about their memories from Afghanistan that there are no houses and no food and shortness of water. They are generally pessimistic about the future and about the peaceful solution of Afghanistan. A refugee woman in an answer to the question of their future remarked, "we cannot think about the future-we have to survive every day." "I don't exactly know what in future we will be or do," said another refugee. Another woman explained, "our future is dependent on the efforts of UN to establish a central rule

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<sup>23</sup> *The News International*, 28 March, 1999

<sup>24</sup> NWFP Chief Minister, Mehtab Ahmad Khan had announced to go ahead with a plan of action by March 15, 1999 for confining refugees to the camps.

in Afghanistan. If Taliban continue with their present policies, our future is dark.” Another lamented that if “we continue our lives like this (refugees) we have no future.” A rural Afghan woman expressed that “our future is clear because there is nothing for us.” All these remarks reflect the deeply troubled minds of Afghan women. They are not optimistic and do not envision any future.

Life in Pakistan is becoming economically difficult. The rents and school fees are increasing day by day, which puts enormous economic pressure on them. Most of the professional and skilled women are unemployed because of the saturated job market.

They expect these problems to be addressed by Pakistan but the latter is in a dilemma because of pressure from within and outside. The donor fatigue has enormously reduced material assistance for Afghan refugees. Pakistani economy is not exuberant and stable enough to look after the Afghans endlessly. Though the Afghans point out that they are not economically dependent as they are working and earning themselves but they fail to understand that they have taken space and utilize the limited resources along with the locals. The local traders are paying taxes while their businesses have come to a standstill due to the free-hand given to Afghan traders in the trading activities in NWFP. The government is also suffering a huge setback in the economic field due to non-payment of taxes by Afghan refugees in their businesses or properties for almost two decades now.<sup>25</sup> Lately some statistics compiled by the crime branch of the Frontier police revealed that the Afghan refugees committed 11.60 per cent i.e. 11 times more crimes in proportionate terms than the local people during 1998.<sup>26</sup> In view of these problems the government is planning to relocate the Afghan refugees from the cities to the camps. How it goes about it, is difficult to answer, as it is an extremely complicated task.

These latest developments have increased the apprehensions of Afghan women and their future in Pakistan. How these fears can be removed and be assured of a relative secure future? No one can come up with quick and easy solutions. Pakistan cannot force them back and earn their criticism. It has to cope with the refugees as they are not going to leave Pakistan in the near future. Therefore, it needs to work out some new strategies to

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<sup>25</sup> *The News International*, 4 January, 1999

<sup>26</sup> In terms of population percentage, 9653 accused in a population of 1.2 million registered Afghan refugees, their crime percentage comes to 0.8044 per cent against NWFP's 0.0693 per cent. About 12130 were accused amongst the province's population of 17.5 million (according to the 1998 census).

deal with Afghan women. The government, UNHCR, donors and various NGOs working with Afghans need to reassess the current problems of rural and urban refugees and come up with some practical solutions that will be culturally acceptable to them.

In order to educate and train women, the family should be targeted.

If the family can be convinced of the utility of education and training projects, they will be far more successful and beneficial. Any training project that does not take the family into account is doomed to fail as Afghan women can seldom take independent decisions. Family plays a vital role in their protection and security and therefore, should not be overlooked.

Training programmes should have futuristic elements. The future holds great challenges for them. The women need to be groomed and trained in a manner where they will be able to undertake the future responsibilities effectively, whether bread earners, mothers, housewives or professionals.

Education holds the key to most of the refugee problems. It is vital and should receive the maximum attention from the government of Pakistan, donors, UNHCR etc. Education in the cultural context will bear positive fruit. Formal and non-formal education simultaneously should increase and improve in quality. Vigilance and checks are required on the curriculum and text books used in private Afghan schools that have sprouted throughout NWFP and Baluchistan. The government can hire the services of Afghan refugee educationists for this purpose.

Finally an effective networking of various NGOs dealing with gender issues is required. They need to coordinate their activities and complement each other in dealing with the problems of Afghans. Currently there is a lot of overlapping and wastage of resources and energies.

